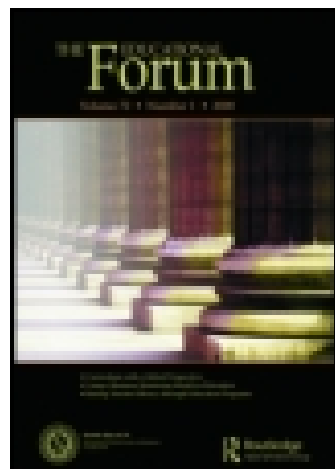


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Idiographic Holistic Thinking in Education

JOHN MARTIN RICH

DESPITE the hundreds of empirical studies added each year to the burgeoning research literature in education and the large scale federal funding of research during the sixties, criticisms of educational research have grown rather than abated. A mood of skepticism has arisen as to the efficacy of social science methodology and interventionist strategies in coping with complex and deep-seated educational problems. Improvements have been registered in statistics, computer technology, and the measurement of human characteristics, but many complain of the quality of the research. Specifically, it has been claimed that educational research has been repetitious, trivial, and isolated; that it frequently generates contradictory results; that researchers are incompetent; and that uniformity has permitted research methodology to dictate the kind of research to undertake.¹ Some believe that the problem lies in the need for more applied, rather than basic, research.² Others have claimed that without basic research, applied research becomes superficial and empty.³

Without in any way dismissing the specific shortcomings previously cited, we suggest that the problem may be of an entirely different kind. Our contention is that the prevailing model, which we will call "scientific behavioral" thinking, is not entirely appropriate for fruitful thinking and research in education. It is the thesis of this article that an "idiographic holistic" model is needed.

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Historically, educational research was based on a positivistic model, which has now been broadened and modified to include social science and behavioral research methodology. This type of research seeks to discover uniformities and regularities characteristic of a whole class of objects. Idiographic holistic approach attempts to reveal the particular pattern in a unique individual. Whereas the scientific behavioral approach focuses on the incidence and distribution of some one datum within a population, the idiographic holistic approach looks at the various behaviors and interactions that shape the total person. This latter approach seeks to understand the individual as a unique being rather than as a specimen of a class.

Failures in education cannot be attributed as much to the inability of scientific behavioral research to improve practice as to the inability of teachers and administrators to relate to the student as a unique being and to understand him as a total person. Many educational reformers have characterized school systems as bureaucratic, dehumanizing, and alienating institutions which crush the hopes and aspirations of youth and extinguish intellectual curiosity and the joy of learning. Dehumanization of schools is one of today's most critical problems. It can best be attacked by the development of idiographic holistic thinking. Our purpose in this article will be to outline this type of thinking more fully and show how it can be utilized effectively in educational practice.

A basic characteristic of the idiographic holistic approach is that it studies the person as a whole. As with Buber's "I-Thou" relationship,⁴ the teacher treats the student as one capable of entering into a relationship bound by mutuality. It is a direct and intense mutual relation in which

one meets the "other" as genuinely different from oneself, but as someone with whom one can enter into an active relation. We can study things in terms of their components in an objective manner ("I-It"), but when they are encountered with "the power of exclusiveness," the components become united in a relational event. The educative relationship is one of inclusion.⁵ The educator's concern is the person as a whole, in his present actualities and future possibilities.⁶ Or, as Marcel would say, one comes to recognize the other person as a being in his own right, and this recognition leads to more integrated and inclusive experiences.⁷

In addition to studying the person as a whole, one studies the other person from the inside. Bergson speaks of gaining sympathy with another's state of mind through an act of imagination. In contrast to the method of analysis, which reduces the object to elements common to other objects, one utilizes intuition, "the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible."⁸

A way of thinking that seeks to know from the inside is similar to *verstehen*. Thus an attempt is made to study not merely what people do, but the thoughts, value judgments, and purposes which have led them to do it. Our knowledge is not limited to the phenomenal and external.

These internal factors may better be understood in terms of Weber's theory of social action.⁹ Understanding, according to Weber, may be of two types: direct observational understanding, and understanding in terms of motive.¹⁰ In contrast to the former type that utilizes overt manifestations of behavior, the latter type is based on understanding the motive(s) of the actor in performing the act. We under-

stand why someone fires a gun when we know the actor's motive for doing so. By like token, when a person who is walking at a normal pace breaks into a run, the reason for his act is not evident from his behavior. Sudden fear, lateness for an appointment, the desire for exercise, or some other motive may be the causal factor. "A correct causal interpretation of a concrete course of action is arrived at when the overt actions and the motives have both been correctly apprehended and at the same time their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible."¹¹ However, even the most perceptive observer cannot gain a total understanding of the motives of another without full identity of thought processes. One way to bridge the gulf, according to Alfred Schutz, is to reduce the motives of another to "typifications," or typical patterns of motives in reference to typical situations, typical ends, and means.¹²

The scientific behavioral approach studies people as objects rather than subjects. It examines external behavior, searching for regularities and uniformities characteristic of a whole class rather than unique factors of the person. Representing a person in the form of classes, categories, and symbols is a view from the outside. But the individual, by being himself and not a representation, is in a sense "perfect by being perfectly what it is."¹³ Thus the individual is incommensurable in those respects which matter most—that which gives him an identity and selfhood not replicated in the personality and life history of another.

While not denying the reality of scientific behavioral thinking, idiographic holistic thinking refuses to accept its results as final; nor does it accept the claim that the extension of scientific methods from the natural sciences to the study of man is in

itself sufficient to provide the knowledge we seek. It refuses to accept the divisive and disunifying consequences of the outside view, and seeks to restore unity in our apprehension of the individual. The net effect is to integrate aspects and activities of the self into a totality.

So far we have outlined the characteristic features of the idiographic holistic mode of thinking. Now we need to state precisely the bearing this mode of thinking has on the teacher and how it may be effectively used in relating to students. It would be misleading to assume that the scientific behavioral approach is adequate for thinking about and attempting to understand the educational process. It is our hypothesis that, by learning to use the idiographic holistic mode of thinking, the teacher will more likely be able to understand individual differences, relate more effectively to the uniqueness of each student, and overcome problems of boredom, alienation, and the student's sense of manipulation and dehumanization.

Several different procedures may prove promising in using this type of thinking effectively. Observed factors in a situation are understandable when we can apply a generalization based on personal experience.¹⁴ Generalizations are developed over a period of years by introspection and self-observation. We can understand why someone becomes angry in a situation when we can generalize from our own experience that situations of the type under consideration tend to provoke anger.

But this procedure has inherent limitations which make it necessary that it be supplemented with other procedures. The approach overly relies upon the richness and depth of personal experience and the perceptiveness and insight acquired by means of these experiences. As such, the procedure would tend to limit the idio-

graphic holistic approach to those educators who have excelled in refining the meaning of their experiences.

Initially we begin to know other people by getting them to tell us about themselves. Still, we must get to know them more from "the inside," and this can probably best be accomplished through understanding the motives and values of the actor. Robert MacIver has noted that social facts are different from scientific studies of nonhuman behavior; the former are known, in some degree, from the inside, but the latter only from the outside. "Why did the citizens turn against the government? Why did the union call a strike? To answer these questions we must project ourselves into the situation we are investigating. We must learn the values and the aims and the hopes of human beings as they operate within a particular situation."¹⁵

Thus, in addition to the study of motives, we supplement our understanding of the person by knowing his principal values, aims, and aspirations. Why a person makes sacrifices for others, perseveres in the face of great hardships, and works diligently without certainty of reward can be explained in terms of values, aims; and motives. By like token, why a student rebels, refuses to follow a teacher's instructions, or chooses to drop out of school can also be understood by the same approach.

Empathy is another important factor which promotes a view from the inside. This is well illustrated by a critic or historian of ideas who attempts to understand another's thought. Empathy, according to Ernst Cassirer, must be part of the critic's equipment; he must sympathetically enter and relive the thinker's world of ideas by imaginatively recreating that world.¹⁶ Similarly, the teacher would

attempt empathically to understand the ideas, value system, and cultural background that influence the student's actions. The teacher should be able to grasp basic value systems of the culture (as represented by students in his class) and the premises and grounds upon which they rest. The teacher must also be able to apprehend the inimitable expression of these values as they are assimilated by the student and expressed in his daily experience. In other words, empathy aids the teacher in comprehending the panoply of ideas, values, and aspirations that are expressed and underlie actions, whether shared or unique.

Idiographic holistic thinking does not dehumanize. It refuses to study persons as objects and characteristics of classes and categories. It seeks instead to understand purposive actions of the total individual, within the framework of values and ideas that animate the person's life. By understanding another, the teacher is in a better position to help the student continue to grow, and to help him transcend his present circumstances and self-imposed limitations. The teacher can prepare the conditions which promote transcendence through the integration of new experiences and ideas that enable the student to gain greater self-mastery and assume increasing responsibility for his own education. The teacher's ability to see the world as it appears to the student does not mean that the teacher has the same reactions as the student; it does mean that the teacher can understand why the student is disturbed, perplexed, or joyful. But the teacher is not only able to understand the student's thoughts and feelings and his way of relating to others and the world, the teacher is also able to inspire the student to be himself and then to become the best self of which he is capable. The teacher is

able to accomplish these things because he has courage and genuinely cares. This means that the teacher must first care for and respect himself, that he must make himself whole before he can fruitfully utilize an idiographic holistic approach; only in that way is it possible genuinely to care about others so that each person can become the best self of which he is capable.

NOTES

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4. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Part I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).
5. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 98.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
7. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (London: Harvill Press, Ltd., 1960), p. 48.
8. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1949), p. 23.
9. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947), chap. 1.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95. Weber's technical use of the term "understanding" is, according to Talcott Parsons, "a distinctly narrower meaning than either the German or the English in everyday use."
11. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
12. Alfred Schutz, "The Social World and the Theory of Social Action," *Social Research* 27(Summer 1960):203-221.
13. Bergson, *Metaphysics*.
14. See, in this connection, Theodore Abel, "The Operation Called Verstehen," *American Journal of Sociology* 54(1948):11-18.
15. Quoted in M. Berger, T. Abel, and C. H. Page, eds., *Freedom and Control in Modern Society* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1954), p. 290.
16. See Peter Gay's "Introduction" to Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 21-22.